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Forging Cooperation in South Asia Problems and Prospects

South Asia is that part of the globe which is situated south of the Himalayas. There are seven independent countries in this region – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. If you look at the map you will realize they are seven sisters of the same geographical entity.

Had there been an atmosphere of cooperation among these countries, they would have become a very strong group of nations. The benefit of this unity would certainly have been shared by each unit of this entity. However, an atmosphere of rivalry on one score or another has unfortunately become a permanent feature of this region. It is these very countries which pursue the developed countries of Europe and America to seek their help and cooperation, but are hardly willing to cooperate amongst themselves. This is the most important problem of this part of the world. That is why each part is paying a heavy price of one kind or the other.

Mutual cooperation would benefit all. For instance, Pakistan has natural gas which India is in need of, while India has coal which Pakistan is in need of. But neither is able to benefit from the other's resources. Similarly, Bangladesh is in need of Ganga water, while India requires a road or railway link passing through Bangladesh in order to join West Bengal to the eastern part of the country, but due to their inability to reach an agreement both are consequently suffering.

As a permanent solution to this problem one suggestion comes to mind. It may appear a utopian suggestion, but no other solution appears to be in sight. That is, to form a confederation of all the seven South Asian states which are economically and geographically interdependent.

To realize this most beneficial suggestion India would have to play the role of a partner instead of a big brother, while the other states would have to avoid minor differences for the sake of a greater cause.

If this system of confederation were to be established in South Asia, a new spirit would immediately be awakened in this region, which as a geographical entity, would come to assume great importance on the world map. Without losing anything, each of its parts would share the strength of the others, hence emerging strong and indomitable.

Fear of God made the stick fall from his hand

Abu Masud Ansari says that one day he became angry with his slave and began beating him with a stick. Just then he heard a voice from behind him "Abu Masud, realise ... ," but, in his fury, he was unable to recognize the voice. When the speaker came nearer, he realized that it was the Prophet of God. "You should realize:" said the Prophet, 'that God has more power over you than you have over this slave.' On hearing this, Abu Masud let the stick fall from his hand. "Never again will I beat a slave," he vowed, "and seeking God's good pleasure, I hereby give this slave his freedom." "If you had not done this, you would have been touched by the flames of Hell" said the Prophet.

(Muslim, Sahih)

A Human Failing

Men, serve your Lord, Who has created you and those who have gone before you, so that you may guard yourselves against evil; Who has made the earth a bed for you and the sky a dome, and has sent down water from the sky to bring forth fruits for your sustenance. Do not knowingly set up other gods beside Him (2:21-22).

Man is a creature who cannot survive on his own. At all times he requires many support to maintain his existence in this world: an earth whose gravity keeps him upon its surface; an atmosphere to provide him with a constant supply of oxygen; a sun, which unfailingly gives him heat and light; an abundance of water, without which no human life is possible; a variety of foods to give him continual nourishment. God, therefore, as the Creator of man, and of all the other things in the heavens and on earth, has made lavish provision of all these innumerable other things for man's existence in this world.

Indeed, God has brought into existence the entire universe and everything is under His constant surveillance. That is why the only proper course for man is to accept God as his Creator, Sustainer and Lord, without associating anyone or any thing in His godhead. But since God is not visible, it sometimes happens that man comes to attach importance to something visible, and perhaps tangible and then accords to it the status of divinity. A creature, or a thing, comes, partly or wholly, to be regarded as the Creator's equal, and is sometimes even given the name of God.

This is where man falls into serious errors. For the Prophet's call to man is to accord the status of greatness to God alone. Any thing or creature seated on the pedestal of divinity must therefore be unseated and divested of this status of greatness. It is only fitting, and in the true nature of things, that man should worship God alone, without associating any other object with Him.

Universe bears Witness

In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night. and day; in the ships that sail the ocean with cargoes beneficial to man; in the water which Allah sends down from the sky and with which he revives the earth after its death, dispersing over it all manner of beasts; in the movements of the winds, and in the clouds driven between earth and sky: surely in these there are signs for people who understand (2: 163-164).

The universe, stretching out to infinity on all sides, is a sublime testament to God's immanence. The very existence of an incredibly vast universe is proof of there being a Creator. And that there is only one Creator and Sustainer is testified to by the complete harmony and correspondence of all the objects in existence, despite their multiplicity.

So many of these things having been tamed to meet human requirements shows that man's Creator is a God of unbounded compassion; even before man came into existence, God had already provided for all his needs. Moreover, the usefulness inherent in so many of our earthly phenomena is a silent, but certain indicator of the universe having been consciously planned as a purposive entity. A sign of the limitless extent of God's power is the infinite variety of animal species all thriving on the same nutrients and water which He provided. Another sign of his power is the inevitability with which each death is succeeded by a life. Life and freshness come to lifeless things because that is how God causes nature to function. If death in the universe is only a temporary phase that is because God wills it to be so.

Man's God is only One God. He alone is worthy of becoming the centre of man's attention. Our existence and all the things we have been provided with on earth are attributable solely to God, the source of all divine blessings. Man must make Him his object of worship in the real sense and must eternally associate with Him all his hopes and feelings.

FEARING GOD'S PUNISHMENT, EVEN WHEN ONE IS DEALING WITH THE LOWLY

Once when the Prophet was at home with his wife, Umm Salamah, he summoned the maidservant for some errand, but she seemed to take a long time in coming. Seeing signs of anger on the Prophet's face, Umm Salamah got up to see what had happened to the girl. She opened the curtain and saw her playing outside with the goat's kids. She called to her once again, and this time she came. The Prophet was holding a tooth-stick at the time, "If I had not feared the retribution of Judgement Day," he said to the girl, "I would have hit you with this tooth-stick".

(Al-Adab al-Mufrad)

Promise

In mutual dealings in social life, it often happens that a person gives his word to another. There is apparently no third person or group between the two, yet there is always a third present and that is God who is the supreme witness. That is why every promise becomes a divine promise.

A believer therefore is extremely sensitive about giving his word. His conviction is that every commitment made between two persons is under the watchful eyes of God, and that he will be accountable for its fulfillment in the court of God. This compels him to be highly responsible as regards his promises. Whenever he gives his word to anyone he makes a point of keeping it.

People who invariably fulfil their promises are predictable characters in a society, and give their society that particular quality which exists on a vast scale throughout the universe. Every part of this universe is functioning with the most exact precision. For instance, we can learn in advance about any star's or planet's rotation and where it will be moving after a hundred or even a thousand years. Similarly, we know in advance what the boiling point of water will be. In this way the entire universe evinces a predictable character.

Many other virtues come in the wake of the regular fulfillment of promises. One of these is mutual trust. In a society where mutual trust exists, there is no discord and dissension between the people; there is an atmosphere of confidence and peaceability as there is no fear of promises being broken.

Readiness to fulfil promises is a commendable trait; it is *iman* (faith) that makes man the possessor of this highest of human virtues.

THE HEART AND THE TONGUE: OF ALL THINGS THE BEST AND THE WORST

Luqman the Wise, an Abyssynian slave, was once asked by his master to slaughter a goat and bring him two pieces of its best meat. Luqman did as he was bid, then cooked the goat and brought his master its tongue and heart. A few days later, his master asked him to slaughter another goat and, this time, bring him two pieces of its worst meat. Luqman again did as he was bid, but presented his master with the same two parts of the animal – its tongue and its heart. His master then inquired as to why it was that he had brought him the same parts on both occasions. “If both these parts are sound,” replied Luqman, “then there is nothing to compare with them. But if they are both defective, there is nothing worse.”

The Policy of Peace in Islam How to Attain normalcy in Jerusalem

According to the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, a believer is one with whom one can trust one's life and property. That is because Islam is a religion of peace. The Qur'an calls its way 'the paths of peace' (5: 16). It describes reconciliation as the best policy, (4:128) and states quite plainly that God abhors disturbance of the peace (2:205).

Yet, in this world, for one reason or the other, peace remains elusive. Differences – political and apolitical – keep on arising between individuals and groups, Muslims and non-Muslims. Whenever people refuse to be tolerant of these differences, insisting that they be rooted out the moment they arise, there is bound to be strife. Peace, as a result, can never prevail in this world.

One recent example is the ever-recurring conflict over Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a very ancient, historic city with a unique value for all the millions of people of different religious persuasions who believe it to be their very own sacred place. Jerusalem is, indeed, a symbol and centre of inspiration for the three great Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For Jews, it is a living proof of their ancient grandeur, and the pivot of their national history. For Christians, it is the scene of their Saviour's agony and triumph. For Muslims, it is the first halting place on the Prophet's mystic journey, and also the site of one of Islam's most sacred Shrines. Thus, for all three faiths, it is a centre of pilgrimage, while for Muslims it is the third holiest place of worship.

Now the question arises as to how, when it is a place of worship for all three religions, it can be freely accessible to all. How can the adherents of all the three religions have the opportunity there to satisfy their religious feelings?

Nowadays, all around us, we hear the slogan: "Jerusalem is ours." The raising of this slogan by different parties clearly shows that each one desires political supremacy for itself. All the three believe that without political dominance over this sacred city, they cannot worship God in the proper sense of the word.

If the condition for visiting this sacred place were that only that person or group could visit it who enjoyed political dominance there, Jerusalem would be turned from a place of peaceful worship into a battlefield. As political power can be wielded by only one religious group at a time, the other two groups, who are not in power, will constantly be in opposition to it. In this way, a place which should remain perfectly 'tranquil' will be eternally rent by clash and confrontation. As a result, not even the group in power will have the opportunity to perform its religious rites in peace.

This is indeed a very practical and important question which demands a serious rethinking. I would like to deal here briefly with the position of Islam in this matter.

The first indirect reference to Jerusalem appears in the 17th surah of the Qur'an. It says: 'Glory be to Him who made His Servant go by night from the Sacred Mosque to the distant Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that we might show him some of Our Signs' (17:1). Prior to the emigration in early 622, the Prophet Muhammad went on an extraordinary journey called Mi'raj (Ascension) in the history of Islam. Through God's unseen arrangement, this journey took the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem. There, according to the belief of the Muslims, he performed a prayer in congregation with all the Prophets who had been his forerunners at the holy site of al-Masjid al-Aqsa (*at Bayt al-Maqdis*).

Another reference to Jerusalem appears in one of the sayings of the Prophet recorded in all the six authentic books of Hadith with minor differences in wording. According to this tradition, there are only three mosques to which a journey may be lawfully made for the purpose of saying one's prayers – al-Masjid al-Haram of Mecca, al-Masjid al-Nabi of Medina and al-Masjid al-Aqsa of Jerusalem. (Certain traditions use the name Masjid Ilia for the Masjid al-Aqsa in Palestine.) Yet another tradition tells us that there is a far greater reward for praying in these three mosques than in any other mosque.

We learn, however, from the Qur'an that in no part of the world can political power be wielded indefinitely by the same nation or group: 'We bring these days to men by turns' (3:140). Given that power changes hands from time to time between different communities, how are believers to worship at al-Masjid al-Aqsa? Whereas each Muslim has a natural desire to enter this mosque and prostrate himself before God as the Prophet Muhammad and the other Prophets did.

According to the Qur'an political power, by the very law of nature, cannot forever remain with one nation. In that case, if this act of worship is linked with the notion that a Muslim can receive God's blessings only when this land is under Muslim political rule, millions of Muslims would have had to bury this desire in their hearts and leave this world with this cherished desire unfulfilled, as it happened with the former Saudi king Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz (1906-1975). They would never have had, the unique experience of prostrating themselves before Almighty God at a place where the Prophet Muhammad, along with all the Prophets, had prostrated himself before his Lord.

What is the solution to this problem? Its solution lies in a practice (sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad: to separate the religious from the political aspect of the matter. This would enable men of religion to solve the problem by applying what is called 'practical wisdom,' that is, to avoid the present problems and grasp the available opportunities. By following this process, they would be able to fulfill their cherished religious desire of which they have been denied unnecessarily so far. In the process, they would be able to avoid confrontational situations. Here are some telling examples of this sunnah of the Prophet.

1. The Prophet Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina in July 622. For the first year and a half in Medina (i.e. till the end of 623) he and his companions prayed in the direction of al-Bayt al-Maqdis in Jerusalem. At the beginning of 624, the faithful were enjoined, by Qur'anic revelation, to face in the direction of the Sacred Ka'ba at Mecca to say their prayers (2:144).

When this injunction regarding the Qiblah (direction of prayer) was revealed, 360 idols were still in position in the Ka 'bah, at that time a long-established centre of polytheism. The presence of these idols must certainly have made Muslims feel reluctant to face in the direction of the Ka 'bah at prayer time. How could believers in monotheism turn their faces towards what was, in effect, a structure strongly associated with polytheism? It is significant that along with the change of Qiblah came the injunction to treat this problem as a matter requiring patience, and not to hesitate in facing the Ka 'bah: "O believers, seek assistance in prayer. God is with those who are patient" (2:153).

As history tells us, this state of affairs continued for six long years, till the conquest of Mecca (630) when the Ka 'bah was cleared of idols. This establishes a very important principle of Islam which may be termed as *Al-fasl bayn al-qaziyatayn*, that is, the separation of two different facets of a problem from each other. According to this principle, the Ka 'bah and the idols were given separate consideration. By remaining patient on the issue of the presence of the idols, believers were able to accept the Ka- 'bah as the direction for prayer.

THEY WILL BE OF GOOD CHEER ON MEETING GOD

While still a young man, Talhah ibn Bara' came to the Prophet to swear allegiance to him and to accept Islam. "I am at your behest," he vowed to the Prophet. "I will do exactly as you command." "Even if I tell you to sever your relations with your parents?" the Prophet asked. (Talha used to look after his mother with great affection.) Talha ibn Bara' at once prepared himself to carry out the Prophet's command. "Talha," the Prophet said to him, "Our religion does not teach one to sever ties. I just wanted you to be absolutely certain of your faith."

Talha ibn Bara' came within the fold of Islam and remained a fine Muslim till the day he died. When he was suffering his final illness, the Prophet came to visit him and found him in a state of unconsciousness. "I think that Talha's soul will be taken up tonight," he said. He departed then, asking to be informed when Talha regained consciousness.

It was midnight before he did so, and he said that the Prophet should not be disturbed at that late hour. "He might be bitten by some harmful creature, or some enemy might do him an injury if he comes out at night," he protested. Talha passed away that very night and the Prophet was not informed until after the morning prayer. The Prophet prayed, "Lord, meet him in such a way that both he and You are good cheer on meeting each other."

(Al-Tabarani)

2. Another such example is the above mentioned heavenly journey (*Isra* or *Mi'raj*) undertaken by the Prophet before the emigration in 622. At that juncture, Jerusalem was ruled by Iranians, that is to say by non-Muslims. The Iranian ruler, Khusroe Parvez, attacked Jerusalem in 614, wresting it from the

Romans, who had governed it since 63 B. C. This political dominance of the Iranian empire ended only when the Roman Emperor Heraclius defeated the Iranians and restored Roman rule over Jerusalem in 629.

This means that, before his emigration, the Prophet Muhammad entered Jerusalem on his *Mi'raj* journey to say his prayer at the Masjid-al-Aqsa at a time when the city was under the rule of a non-Muslim king. From this we derive the very important sunnah of the Prophet that worship and politics practically belong to separate spheres, and, as such, should not be confused with one another.

3. The third example took place after the Hijrah in 629. At that time, Mecca was entirely under the domination of the idolatrous Quraysh. In spite of that, the Prophet and his companions came to Mecca from Medina to spend three days there to perform Umrah (the minor pilgrimage) and the circumambulation of the Ka'bah. This was possible solely because the Prophet did not mix worship with politics. If the Prophet had thought that Umrah could be performed only when Mecca came under Muslim political rule, he would never have entered Mecca for worship along with his companions.

In the light of this sunnah of the Prophet, the solution to the present problem of Jerusalem lies in separating the issue of worship from that of political supremacy. Muslims belonging to Palestine, or any other country, should be able to go freely to Jerusalem in order to pray to God in the Aqsa Mosque. Worship should be totally disassociated from political issues.

To sum it up, the only practical solution to the problem of Jerusalem, in present circumstances, is to apply the above principle of *Al-fasl bayn al-qaziyatayn* to this matter, that is, to keep the two aspects of a controversial issue separate from one another. There is no other possible solution to the problem of Jerusalem. We ought to keep the political aspect apart from its religious aspect so that no ideological barrier comes in the way of worship by the people, and the faithful are able to go to Jerusalem freely in order to satisfy their religious feelings.

IN BETWEEN TWO POSSIBILITIES

The Prophet often used to pray: "O turner of hearts, keep our hearts firm in faith." Having heard him repeat this prayer on many occasions, Prophet's wife, Aishah once asked him, "Prophet of God, why is it that you offer this prayer so often?" The Prophet then explained to her, "Everyone's heart is in between two of God's fingers. When He wish to set a man's heart straight, He does so, and when he wishes to set it awry, He does so."

Purity of Body and Soul

A believer is a clean person. First of all faith cleanses his soul. Consequently his appearance becomes pure as well. His religious thinking makes him a person who loves cleanliness.

A believer performs his ablutions before praying five times a day by washing his face, hands and feet. He takes a bath daily to purify his body. His clothes may be simple, but he always likes to wear well laundered clothes.

Along with this he likes to keep his home clean. Therefore, he cleans his home daily and keeps all his things in their proper places. All these duties become part of his daily life.

A believer does not rest content until he has set all things right, from his body to his home.

This taste for cleanliness is not limited only to his home and body. It also extends outside his home to his neighbours. He begins to want his whole environment to be clean, wherever he stays. So he takes special care to see that he and his family members do not defile their surroundings. This training he gives to others as well. Thus he is not satisfied until and unless he has succeeded in bringing into existence a clean atmosphere all around.

For a common person cleanliness is only cleanliness. But for a believer, cleanliness, besides being simply cleanliness is also an act of worship, for he knows that God likes clean and pure persons.

Furthermore, the faith of the believer is a guarantee that when he has cleaned his body his soul is likewise cleaned. That is why at the moment of washing himself clean, he utters these words in prayer: To God, purify my inner self along with my outer body. In this way, the earnest prayer makes his soul clean too, like his body.

Peace in Islam

Peace is the religion of the universe. Peace should, therefore, be the religion of man too, so that, in the words of Jesus Christ, the will of the Lord may be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6: 10).

When God created heaven and the earth, He so ordered things that each part might perform its function peacefully without clashing with any other part. The Qur'an tells us that "the sun is not allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each in its own orbit runs." (36:40)

For billions of years, therefore, the entire universe has been fulfilling its function in total harmony with His divine plan.

While God has imposed upon the universe the law of nature, in submission to which all of the things making up the universe follow the path of peace, there remains just one exception – that of man. Man has been endowed by God with the free will to make moral choices. He may, or may not follow the path of peace which is so uniformly followed by the rest of the universe.

If human beings, with their freedom of choice, are to be kept on the path of peace, society must be kept free of corrupting elements. That is why the Qur'an enjoins men "not to corrupt the land after it has been set in order" (7:85). The system of nature devised by God already rests on the basis of peace; if this system is not disrupted, it will continue to stay the course set for it by the Almighty. Peace is actually inherent in nature and, as such, cannot be artificially imposed upon man as if it were an external factor.

In order to preserve the peace established by nature from disruption, two important injunctions have been laid down by Islam. One, at the individual level, stresses the exercise of patience, and the other, at the social level, forbids taking the offensive.

The greatest factor responsible for disrupting peace in daily living is negative reaction on the part of individuals. It repeatedly happens in social life that one experiences bitterness on account of others. On such occasions, display of resentment could cause matters to escalate to the point of a head-on collision. That is why Islam repeatedly enjoins us to tread the path of patience. The Qur'an says: "Surely the patient will be paid their wages in full without measure (39: 10). The reason for the rewards for patience being so great is that patience is the key factor in maintaining the desired system of God. In the words of the Qur'an, the patient man "is the helper of God" (61:14).

The other injunction, designed to maintain peace in human society, forbids the waging of an offensive war. No one, in Islam, enjoys the right to wage war against another. There are no grounds on which this could be considered justifiable.

There is only one kind of war permitted in Islam, and that is a defensive war. It is only if one nation, by deviating from the principles of nature, wages war against another, that a defensive war may be waged by

the country under attack. Even then, it must be of temporary nature, and subject to humanitarian considerations.

To sum up, Islam is a religion of peace. The Arabic root of Islam is 'silm' which means peace. The Qur'an states: ' ... and God calls to the home of peace' (10:25).

Peace is the basic to all religions. Let us all strive then to establish peace in the world, for that is the bedrock on which all human progress rests.

KNOWING THE WORLD, BUT NOT THE HEREAFTER

Abu Darda asked certain individuals, "How is it that I behold you full of food, but starved of knowledge?"

(Jami' Bayan ai-Ilm)

The Sir Syed Formula

Today, Sir Syed is highly acclaimed in all circles, be they religious or secular, as a pioneer of the Muslim nation. But, in his own times, he was branded as heretic, an enemy of the Muslim community and an enemy of Islam. When Maulana Altaf Husain Hali joined forces with Sir Syed, both were ridiculed by Akbar Allahabadi:

Syed ki dastan ko Hali se poochhiye
Ghazi Mian ka hal Dafali se poochhiye

What is the reason for the difference in past and present attitudes? It is simply that those who nowadays extol his virtues, do so in retrospect, having had the opportunity to see the results of his guidance, whereas his own contemporaries were so lacking in foresight that they could not imagine any good arising from his teachings. This has been the fate of every reformer. There is no revolutionary who has not suffered from the short sightedness of his contemporaries and who has not, as a result, had to face stiff opposition. Even the prophets were not spared this fate. It is only when the reformer's efforts ultimately bear fruit that people begin to sing his praises.

Sir Syed lived in the days of British rule in India – a period looked upon to by all our senior religious leaders as an age of slavery. Maulana Mohd. Ali Jauhar, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, in short, all our leaders of that time hated the British. In their view, British rule afforded no possibility of Muslim progress. Maulana Mohd. Ali was not ready even to die in an enslaved India. Iqbal went one step further when he said:

Ke ghulami mein badal jata hai qaumon ka zamir
(slavery even drastically affects the conscience of the nations)

However, Sir Syed's thinking was totally different. He discovered favourable aspects of those same British rulers who were regularly depicted as the enemies of Islam. In the 'slave nation,' as Muslim intellectuals would have it, he pointed out that certain freedoms did exist. In support of Sir Syed, Maulana Altaf Husain wrote in his Muqaddama:

Hukumat ne azadiyan tum ko di hain
Taraqqi ki rahen sarasar khuli hain
(The government has given you full freedom.
All the roads of progress are open to you.)

What did his pointing out freedom in slavery really mean? It meant that even under the political subjugation of the British, Indians still had educational and economic freedom. Notwithstanding the political problem, the country still offered them the opportunity to carve out an honourable, affluent life by working in non-political fields.

The opponents of Sir Syed, on the other hand, concentrated on the problem of British usurpation to the exclusion of all else. In their eyes, no progress could be made unless British rule came to an end. But with his deeper insight, Sir Syed saw that if there were problems, there also existed opportunities, side by side with them. In very simple terms, he gave the people a viable formula:

Ignore the problems, feed the opportunities, and, by availing of opportunities, build your life.

In Sir Syed's time, even those who had eyes failed to see the wisdom of this dictum. But now, after the experience of a hundred years, even sightless people can see that Sir Syed's way was the wisest and most appropriate.

In Sir Syed's own time, his approach had appeared to be one of cowardice and inaction. But its subsequent results showed its wisdom, and what its potential had been for positive action. In fact, it was the only possible strategy to adopt. Had his advice been heeded in the initial stages, the Muslim condition would certainly have been very different from what it is today.

But the inability to learn from the past is an ever-present human weakness. Hence the prevalence today of the same short-sightedness as existed in Sir Syed's time. People, of course, have now begun eulogizing the Sir Syed of the past, but if anyone speaks of applying Sir Syed's solutions in the present, they again turn hostile to him as his own contemporaries did.

The most pressing reality of this world is its competitiveness. In such a set-up, it is inevitable that one group or the other will be left behind. This state of affairs has existed since the days of Abel and Cain (the sons of Adam), and it will continue to exist till Doomsday. This system – created by God Himself – will never change.

What needs to be done in this world of competition is not to keep protesting against the prevailing circumstances, but to make a careful study of them. Instead of reacting against the way things are, some method of adjusting to realities must be sought. Sir Syed's formula is the key to such an adjustment.

This world, being one of competition, is bound to be problem-ridden. It has been so throughout the ages and it is still so today. But it must be borne in mind that problems stem from nature's own system and not from the oppression and prejudice of others. What is even more important to grasp is that according to this system devised by nature itself, problems in this world are always followed by opportunities. Given this state of affairs, both reason and wisdom make only one demand.'

Ignore the problems; avail of the opportunities.

This is the only way to succeed in this world. Whenever an individual or a group has achieved success in this life, it has been done by adhering to this principle. Those who attempt to fight problems are more likely to fail than succeed, while those who avail of opportunities have every chance of doing well for themselves. There is no other path to self-improvement in this world, either in India or in any other country. And what holds true for the present, holds equally true for the future.

Limits of Tolerance

According to Voltaire, "Tolerance is a law of nature stamped on the heart of all men."

Nothing could be truer than this statement; tolerance is, indeed, a permanent law of nature. But it is not something which has to be externally imposed, for the human desire for tolerance is limitless. Just as truth and honesty are virtues, so is tolerance a virtue. And just as no one ever needs to ask for how long one should remain truthful and honest, so does one think of tolerance as having an eternal value. The way of tolerance should be unquestioningly adopted at all times as possessing superior merit.

A man who is intolerant is not a human being in the full sense of the expression. To become enraged at antagonism is surely a sign of weakness. Of course, there are many who do not want to recognise the principle of tolerance as being eternal, for, in conditions of adversity, the temptation to retaliate becomes too strong. The feelings of anger which accompany negative reaction must somehow be vented, and those who think and act in this way are keen to retain the illusion that, in hitting back, they are not doing anything unlawful.

Such thinking is quite wrong. In reality, when a man is enraged at anything which goes against his will, tolerance as a priority becomes paramount. Many men strive to become supermen. But the true superman is one who, in really trying situations, can demonstrate his super-tolerance. Just any act of antagonism does not give us the license to be intolerant. Rather, such occasions call for greater tolerance than in normal circumstances. In everyday matter, where there is none of the stress and strain of opposition, no one has difficulty in being tolerant. It is only in extraordinary situations, fraught with conflict, that the truly tolerant man will prove his mettle.

On January 1st, 1995, the United Nations proclaimed 1995 as the "Year of Tolerance," saying that the ability to be tolerant of the actions, beliefs and opinions of others is a major factor in promoting world peace. The statement issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, (UNESCO) on this occasion, emphasizes that amidst the resurgence of ethnic conflicts, discrimination against minorities and xenophobia directed against refugees and asylum-seekers, tolerance is the only way forward. It pointed out that racism and religious fanaticism in many countries had led to many forms of discrimination and the intimidation of those who held contrary views. Violence against and intimidation of authors, journalists and others who exercise their freedom of expression, were also on the increase along with political movements which seek to make particular groups responsible for social ills such as crime and unemployment. Intolerance is one of the greatest challenges we face on the threshold to the 21st century, said the UNESCO Statement. Intolerance is both an ethnic and political problem. It is a rejection of the differences between individuals and between cultures. When intolerance becomes organised or institutionalised, it destroys democratic principles and poses a threat to world peace. (*The Hindustan Times*, January 1, 1995)

TRUE FAITH BRINGS VISIONS OF UNSEEN REALITIES

Malik ibn Anas tells of how Muadh ibn Jabal came before the Prophet and was asked by him, "How is your morning?" "Full of faith in God," replied Muadh. "Every statement applies to something in particular, just as every statement has an inner meaning. To what does your present statement apply?" asked the Prophet. Muadh then told the Prophet that he had never woken up in the morning thinking that he would live till the evening, and never gone to rest in the evening thinking that he would live till morning; nor did he even take one step without the thought crossing his mind that he might not be able to take another. "It is as though I see all those communities, down on their knees, being called to account for their actions. Along with them are their prophets, and their idols, too, – those to which they used to appeal, as well as to God. It is as if I see, with my very own eyes, how the people in Hell are being punished and the people in Paradise are being rewarded." "You have attained true realization," the Prophet told him. "Now let there be no falling away from it."

(Hilyat al-Auliya)

This proclamation of the U.N. is most apt and timely. The prime need of the world today is indeed tolerance.

One of the stark realities of life is that divergence of views does exist between man and man, and that it impinges at all levels. Be it at the level of a family or a society, a community or a country, differences are bound to exist everywhere. Now the question is how best unity can be forged or harmony brought about in the face of human differences.

Some people hold that the removal of all differences is the sine qua non for bringing about unity. But, this view is untenable, for the simple reason that, it is not practicable. You may not like the thorns which essentially accompany roses, but it is not possible for you to pluck out all the thorns and destroy them completely. For, if you pluck out one, another will grow in its place. Even if you run a bull dozer over all rosebushes, new plants will grow in their place bearing roses which are ineluctably accompanied by thorns. In the present scheme of things, roses can be had only by tolerating the existence of thorns. Similarly, a peaceful society can be created only by creating and fostering the spirit of tolerance towards diversities. In this world, unity is achievable only by learning to unite *in spite of differences*, rather than insisting on unity without differences. For total eradication of differences is an impossibility. The secret of attaining peace in life is tolerance of disturbance of the peace.

There is nothing wrong in diversity of opinions. In fact, this is a positive quality which has many advantages. The beauty of the garden of life is actually enhanced if the flower of unity is accompanied by the thorn of diversity.

An advantage flowing from this attitude is that it builds character. If you are well-mannered towards those whose views are similar to yours, you may be said to exhibit a fairly good character. But, if you

behave properly with those holding divergent views from you or who criticise you, then you deserve to be credited with having an excellent character.

In the same way, a society whose members hold identical views and never have any controversial discussions, will soon find itself in the doldrums. The intellectual development of the members of this society will be frozen, because personal evolution takes place only where the interaction of divergent thinking provides the requisite mental stimuli.

The adoption of a policy of tolerance in the midst of controversy and in the face of opposition is not a negative step. It is undoubtedly a positive course of action.

Divergence of views plays an important role in the development of the human psyche. It is only after running the intellectual gauntlet that a developed personality emerges. If, in a human society, this process ceases to operate, the development of character will come to a standstill.

Nobody in this world is perfect. If a man is endowed with some good qualities, he may be lacking in others. This is one of the reasons for differences cropping up between people. But, for life as a whole, this disparateness is actually a great blessing: the good points of one man may compensate for the shortcomings of another, just as one set of talents in one man may complement a different set in another. If people could only learn to tolerate others' differences, their very forbearance would become a great enabling factor in collective human development.

After 1947, when the first Government of Independent India was formed, two important leaders were included in it. One was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the other was Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel. Pandit Nehru's westernized ideas were in great contrast to the orientalism of Sardar Patel. And this caused frequent differences of opinion between these two leaders. But this proved to be a boon for the nation, because with Pandit Nehru's abilities compensating for the shortcomings of Sardar Patel, and vice versa, the end result was one of an efficacious complementarity. The above is a good example of the difference between the respective natures and opinions of individuals essential for human development in general.

The habit of tolerance prevents a man from wasting his time and talent on unnecessary matters. When negatively affected by another's unpalatable behaviour, your mental equilibrium is upset, whereas when emotionally untouched by such behaviour, your mind will fully retain its equilibrium and, without wasting a single moment, you will continue to carry out your duties in the normal way. The policy of tolerance or forbearance enhances your efficacy, while intolerant behaviour reduces it.

Tolerance is not an act of compulsion. It is a positive principle of life, expressing the noble side of a man's character. The existence of tolerant human beings in a society is just like the blooming of flowers in a garden.

Islam: A Tolerant Religion

So far as Islam is concerned, it is an entirely tolerant religion. Islam desires peace to prevail in the world. The Qur'an calls the way of Islam 'the paths of Peace' (5: 16). The state of peace can never prevail in a society if a tolerant attitude is lacking in the people. Tolerance is the only basis for peace; in a society where tolerance is absent, peace likewise will be non-existent.

Peace is the religion of the universe. Peace should, therefore, be the religion of man too, so that, in the words of the Bible, the will of the Lord may be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6: 10).

In a similar vein, the Qur'an tells us that: "The sun is not allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each in its own orbit runs" (36:40).

When God created heaven and the earth, He so ordered things that each part might perform its function peacefully without clashing with any other part. For billions of years, therefore, the entire universe has been fulfilling its function in total harmony with His divine plan.

The universe is following this path of peace – which is known in science as the law of nature as it is imposed upon it by God, whereas man has to adopt this path of peace of his own free will. This has been expressed in the Qur'an in these words: "Are they seeking a religion other than God's, when every soul in heaven and earth has submitted to Him, willingly or by compulsion? To Him they shall all return" (3:83).

Peace is no external factor to be artificially imposed upon man. Peace is inherent in nature itself. The system of nature set up by God already rests on the basis of peace. If this system is not disrupted, it will continue to stay the course set for it by the Almighty. But the only way to keep humanity on the path of peace is to rid it of corruption. That is why the Qur'an enjoins: "And do not corrupt the land after it has been set in order" (7:85).

In order to preserve the peace, established by nature, from disruption, two important injunctions have been laid down by Islam. One, at the individual level, stresses the exercise of patience, and the other, at the social level, forbids taking the offensive.

1. Negative reaction on the part of the individual is the greatest factor responsible for disrupting peace in daily life. It repeatedly happens that in social life one experiences bitterness on account of others. On such occasions, if one reacts negatively, the matter will escalate to the point of a head-on collision. That is why Islam repeatedly enjoins us to tread the path of patience. The Qur'an says: Surely the patient will be paid their wages in full without measure (39: 10).

The reason for the rewards for patience being so great is that patience is the key factor in maintaining the desired system of God. In the words of the Qur'an the patient man is the helper of God (61:14).

2. The other injunction, designed to maintain peace in human society, forbids the waging of an offensive war. No one in Islam enjoys the right to wage war against another. There are no grounds on which this could be considered justifiable.

There is only one kind of war permitted in Islam and that is a defensive war. If a nation, by deviating from the principles of nature, wages war against another nation, defence in such circumstances, subject to certain conditions, is temporarily allowed.

To sum up, Islam is a religion of peace. The Arabic root of Islam, '*silm*', means peace. The Qur'an says: '... and God calls to the home of peace' (10:25).

Peace is basic to all religions. Let us all strive then to establish peace in the world, for that is the bedrock on which all human progress rests.

31 November-December 1998

WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS THE MAN WITHIN

A complaint was made to the Prophet about the behaviour of Abdullah ibn Hudhaifah. It was said that he joked and played the fool too much. "Let him be," said the Prophet, "for, deep down, he has great love for God and His Prophet."

(Ibn 'Asakir)

Speaking the Truth

A believer in God is also necessarily a truth-loving person. He always speaks the truth. In all matters he says just what is in accordance with reality. A true believer cannot afford to tell lies, or hide facts. What does it mean to speak the truth? It is to have no contradiction between man's knowledge and the words that he utters and for that matter, whatever he says should be what has come to his knowledge. Falsehood, by contrast, is the utterance of statements which do not tally with knowledge.

Truth is the highest virtue of a believer's character. A believer is a man of principle. And for such a person telling the truth is paramount. For him no other behaviour is possible, for he finds it impossible to deny the truth.

The world of God is based wholly on truth. Here everything expresses itself in its real form. The sun, the moon, rivers, mountains, stars and planets are all based on truth. They appear just as they really are. In this unfathomably vast universe of God nothing is based on untruth. There is nothing which shows itself in any form other than its real form.

This is the character of nature, which is spread out on a universal scale. A believer too has exactly the same character. He is totally free from falsehood or double-standards. A believer is all truth. His whole existence is moulded to truth. From the very first he appears to be a true person both inside and out.

Speaking the truth is not only a matter of policy for the believer: it is his very religion. Compromising in the matter of truth is not possible for him. He speaks the truth as he cannot live without doing so. He speaks the truth because he knows that not speaking the truth is the negation of his own personality and commitment to something which is the negation of the self is not possible for any worthy person.